

Joseph Bustillos

Case Study One: Understanding the role of e-mail communications at a Successful School

Rien ne réussit comme le succès
Dumas



Understanding the role of e-mail communications at a Successful School

Rien ne réussit comme le succès
"Nothing succeeds like success"
Dumas

"Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication."
Marshall McLuhan (1967)

Introduction

The principal explained to a local journalist profiling his school that some of the "secrets" to the success of his school are the quality of the teaching staff and their level of teamwork (Wakefield, 2001). As I mentioned in a previous essay, every successful manager from boardrooms to sports' locker rooms, begins his or her explanation of their success with a few words on their group's incredible teamwork. In this case study I will be looking at the role of communication and specifically the role of e-mail communication in maintaining this Southern California elementary school's reputation for success

"The following are the universal fundamental laws of literary communication: 1. one must have something to communicate; 2. one must have someone to whom to communicate with; 3. one must really communicate it, not merely express it to oneself alone. Otherwise it would be more to the point to remain silent."
Friedrick Von Schlegel (1797)

Central Question

In my job as technology coordinator and computer lab instructor I've been in and seen every classroom in action and seen the students with and without their teachers in the computer. Let's just say that I've most definitely had the campus tour that no visiting dignitary ever gets. So in terms of determining the staff's technical expertise, I have a pretty good idea what to anticipate (see Case Study Two). Of course it amazes me that educators get so paranoid about these sorts of assessments when they, as educators, know that a baseline must be determined if a course of training is going to be prescribed. And actually I wasn't so interested, in this study, to tally their tech savvy, but their attitude toward changing the way they've always done things, in this case, e-mail communication.

Description of the Setting

My current school, Twain Elementary, received word at the end of this year (2001-2002) that they've been recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence for the second time in a row (1999 & now 2002). Twain has 40 classroom teachers, four certificated specialists (speech, RSP & computer lab), and a front office staff of three to assist the principal and counselor work with the over 800 students. The school is located in a middle class/upper middle class residential neighborhood and has a very strong PTA and Parent volunteer presence on campus (VIPs).

In terms of technology, the school is in the beginning networking stages. Every classroom has six Ethernet data-ports, one connected Gateway PC (mostly circa 1999 - 2001 PII's and PIII's), and assorted other Apple IIs, older PCs, and Pre-iMac Macintoshes that are still used as "stations," though I'm trying to encourage staff to let go of these relics. There are also over 60 Alpha-Smart keyboard devices in circulation (that I am current trying to inventory). The computer lab is equipped with 41 aging P166 Gateways PCs, which were kind'a state-of-the-art when they were purchased five-years-ago., but now gingerly occupy the trailing edge of technology. This is the first year that the campus has had Internet access. This is also the first year that the teachers and students have had to contend with Novell login screens and network file-sharing procedures and that proved to be a major hurdle for the first three months of the school year.

As the new computer lab teacher, I also asked the teachers at the beginning of the year (and over the course of the year) to submit general classroom curriculum calendars so that I could adjust the

computer lab program to support their classroom studies. Because of the networking changes and my newness to this campus we spend a lot of the year looking over each other's shoulders trying to figure out what the other was doing, and more importantly, trying to determine what was possible, given our facilities and our learning/technology vision for our students.

Description of the Data-Gathering Process

All staff members (front office and teachers) were given a printed copy of the 15-question multiple choice questionnaire regarding email and district email in their mail box and were also emailed a copy to their district email account (see Appendix A). They were told that they would have two-weeks to complete the questionnaire (4/26/02 - 5/10/02). They could either send it back to me via my email account or place a printed copy in my office box.

Several months before receiving the questionnaire I conducted an all-staff training session on using district email during a staff meeting (attendance was mandatory) and then had one voluntary follow-up session.

They were told that the questionnaire would be used to make changes in our use of communication technology to make it more useful for them and they were also told that it was part of my pepperdine project.

"If writing must be a precise form of communication, it should be treated like a precision instrument. It should be sharpened, and it should not be used carelessly."

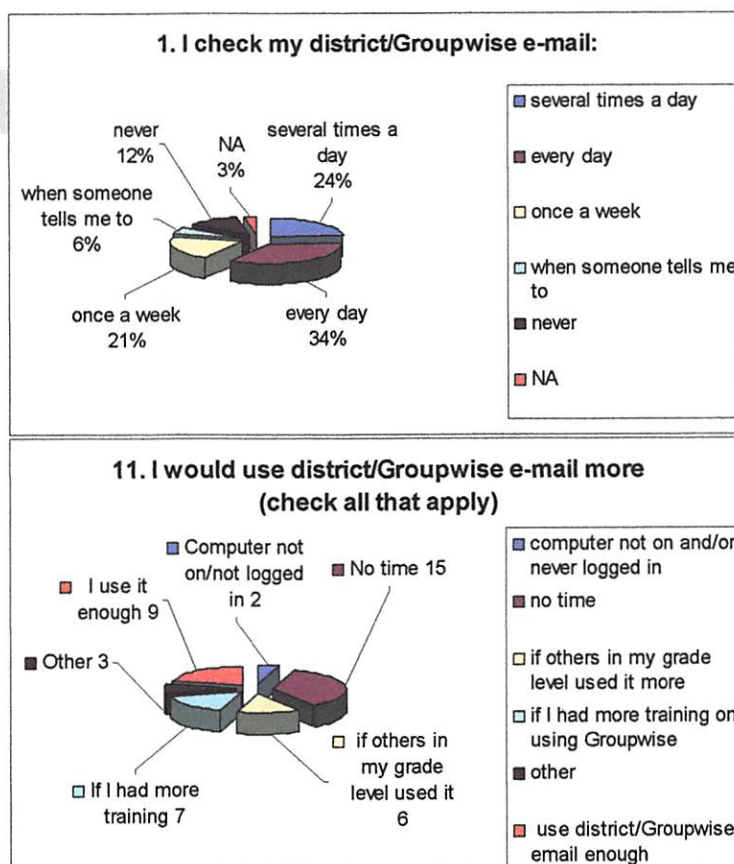
Theodore M. Bernstein (1979)

Observations

The vast majority of the respondents turned in their completed questionnaires within a week and in printed form. Thirty-four out of 48 staff members responded (71% of staff), which the principal said was far better than prior surveys—but this also means that 29% of the staff is not represented in this research.

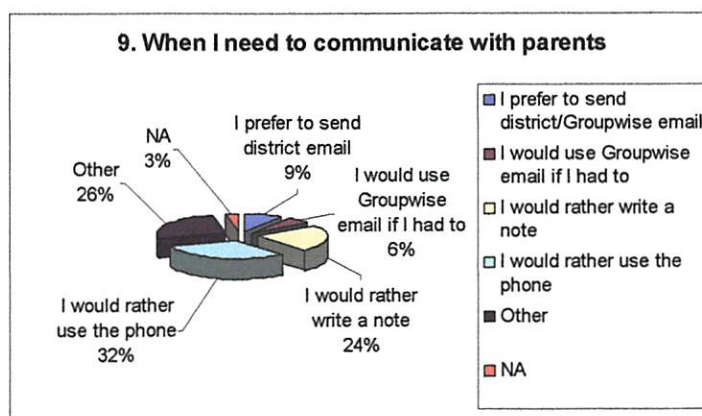
First things first, of the respondents most the largest group indicated that they checked their email every day, followed by the group that checked several times a day, with the once-a-week group

right behind them. The "never," "when someone tells me no," and "not applicable" groups combined equaled the "once-a-week" group. Further down the questionnaire they were asked why they didn't check their mail more frequently and the number one answer was that they didn't feel like they had enough time in the day. Time to use and learn the district e-mail application (Novell's Groupwise) was also indicated in question 12, when asked for reasons they would use the program's calendar function more.



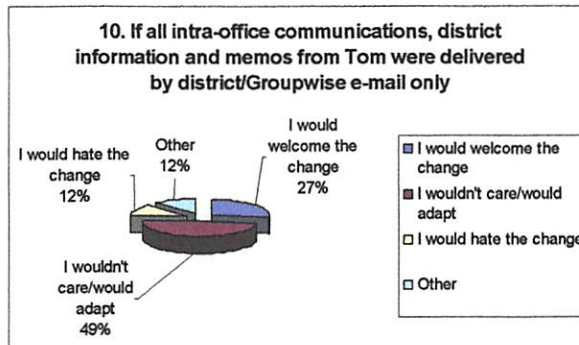
As a whole the respondents indicated that they were generally comfortable using the district e-mail program (sending and receiving). But when asked about specific situations, they indicated that they had specific preferences:

- Phone: They preferred using the phone when communicating with on-campus services (RSP, Speech, and the Nurse).
- Notes: They preferred using notes (usually handwritten) when communicating with the principal, office staff or parents.
- Face-to-Face ("Other"): They preferred face-to-face, hallway meetings when they need to contact or communicate with fellow grade-level teachers.
- E-mail: Email

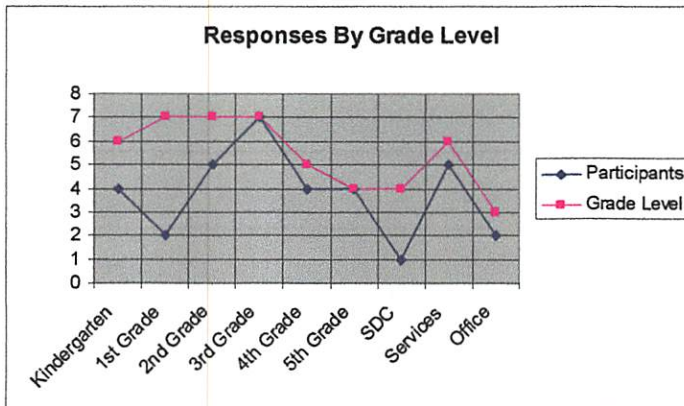


was preferred when they need to communicate with non-grade-level teachers, off-campus teachers, and the district office.

When asked how they would feel if all intra-office communication, district information and memos from the principal were switched to an e-mail only delivery system the vast majority said that they wouldn't care or would adjust.



When asked about home usage, the largest group said that they checked their home email daily (followed by "occasionally," and then "once-a-week").



When asked about home use of chat clients such as AOL Instant Messenger or MSN Messenger, the vast majority (67%) said that they never used them. The vast majority of the respondents turned in a hardcopy version of this questionnaire (vs. e-mail their answer directly to me).

"What we've got here is failure to communicate."

Captain "Cool Hand Luke" (1967)

Discussion/Conclusions

The first thing that became clear to me when I review the data was that I'd begun with a particular prejudice in terms of how teachers should approach using email. What was wrong with my assumption was that I had just come from a campus where teachers only had their office mail boxes and an antiquated intercom system that required the school secretary to connect teachers to other on-campus teachers and allowed for no off-site calls. But at Twain teachers have phones with voice mail. Why would they fire up a computer, wait for it to boot-up, type in their

Novell server login, launch the Groupwise client, type in that program's password, just to tell another teacher that there's going to be an emergency meeting at the end of the day? The "technology solution" (in this case, e-mail) has to be perceived to be better than the current method. And in this case the phone tends to beat out email for simplicity and ability to do the job.

This leads to the second point where technology solutions in the classroom tend to run aground: How do teachers actually function in the classroom? From my classroom observations over the past four years two words or ideas comes to mind: "Motion" and "Interaction." I know that the media and the uninformed tend to see the educator sitting behind a desk (often reading the paper or doing a crossword), while students busily toil over worksheets. This, of course, is complete fiction. At the elementary level the educator is everywhere present in the classroom working with the whole brood or has one part fully involved in an activity while working with the other part. Anything that might take his/her attention away from the students for just a second is an unwelcome complication.

Granted, checking one's email at the beginning of the day and end of the day isn't asking too much, but the idea is that one is working with established ways of doing things, especially if they're successful. So the tech solution has to fit the job, even with something as simple as e-mail

Resources

Bustillos, Joseph (2002). An Observational Essay on the Nature of Success. Pepperdine University, EDC633. Available: <http://hale.pepperdine.edu/%7Ejbbustil/images/palm/JBB%27s%20ED633%20Final%20Project%20-%20Success.pdf>

McLuhan, Marshall (1967). The Medium Is the Massage. Random House. Available: <http://www.bartleby.com/66/23/38523.html>

Pearce, Donn, Frank R. Pierson, and Stuart Rosenberg (1967). "Cool Hand Luke." Available: <http://www.bartleby.com/66/55/43955.html>.

Simpson's Contemporary Quotations (1988) "Theodore M. Bernstein recalled on his death on June 27, 1979." Compiled by James B. Simpson. Houghton Mifflin Company. Available: <http://www.bartleby.com/63/78/7978.html>.

Von Schlegel, Friedrich (1968). Aphorism 98 in Selected Aphorisms from the Lyceum. Behler, Ernst, trans. Pennsylvania University Press. Available: <http://www.bartleby.com/66/70/48570.html>.

Appendix A: E-mail Survey Questionnaire

Twain ES/LBUSD Computer Lab Memo



To: Twain Staff
From: Joe Bustillos
Date: 6/30/2002
Re: Communication Technology Survey

Twain Staff,

Below is a 15-question survey about the use of our communication technology at Twain Elementary. I am very interested in making the changes needed to make this technology more useful. Your candid and honest responses are greatly appreciated. Because this survey is also part of my MA program, I would also appreciate getting these surveys back as soon as possible. You can fill out these sheets, and put it in my box, or use the copy being sent to you via district email. Thanks for your cooperation.

Joe Bustillos

QUESTIONS:

How can our communication technology help our program(s)?

Please check one answer per question (unless instructed otherwise)

1. I check my district/Groupwise e-mail:

- ☐ several times a day,
- ☐ every day,
- ☐ once a week,
- ☐ when someone tells me to,
- ☐ never

2. When I receive district/Groupwise e-mail I'm comfortable using the "reply" button

- ☐ yes,
- ☐ no,

- () I've never used the "reply" button,
() what "reply" button?

3. I'm comfortable sending district/Groupwise e-mail that I've composed:

() no,

4. When I need to communicate with the Office or Tom

☐ I would use Groupwise e-mail if I had to,

() Other _____

5. When I need to communicate with services (computer lab, RSP, Speech, counselor)

☐ I would use Groupwise e-mail if I had to,

() Other _____

6. When I need to communicate with teachers in my grade-level

☐ I would use Groupwise e-mail if I had to,

() Other _____

7. When I need to communicate with other teachers

() I would use Groupwise e-mail if I had to,

() Other _____

8. When I need to communicate with someone in the district office or off-site teachers

() I would use Groupwise e-mail if I had to,

() Other _____

9. When I need to communicate with parents

() I would use Groupwise e-mail if I had to,

() Other _____

10. If all intra-office communications, district information and memos from Tom were delivered by district/Groupwise e-mail only

() I wouldn't care/would adapt

☐ Other _____

11. I would use district/Groupwise e-mail more

(check all that apply)

- ☐ but my computer is rarely on and/or I'm never logged in
- ☐ but I have no time before/during/or after my teaching day to be sitting at the computer
- ☐ if others in my grade level used it more
- ☐ if I had more training on using Groupwise
- ☐ other
- ☐ I use district/Groupwise e-mail enough

12. I would use district/Groupwise's calendar feature

(check all that apply)

- ☐ but my computer is rarely on and/or I'm never logged in
- ☐ but I have no time before/during/or after my teaching day to be sitting at the computer
- ☐ if others in my grade level used it more
- ☐ if I had more training on using Groupwise
- ☐ other
- ☐ I use district/Groupwise calendar enough

13. I use personal e-mail at home

- ☐ daily to contact friends and family
- ☐ once a week to contact friends and family
- ☐ occasionally to contact friends and family
- ☐ never

14. I use Instant Messenger (AOL/MSN)/chat client at home

- ☐ daily to contact friends and family
- ☐ once a week to contact friends and family
- ☐ occasionally to contact friends and family
- ☐ never

15. Technology is important to education

(check all that apply)

- ☐ because it makes it possible for our students to have access to museums, other educators and famous people that we could only read about before
- ☐ because it helps us prepare our students for their future world
- ☐ because it keeps our teaching fresh and current
- ☐ but it is too expensive and troublesome to be useful
- ☐ I disagree, technology is not important to education
- ☐ other _____

For tracking purposes please indicate your grade level: _____

Additional comments:

S

Appendix B: Survey Results

QUESTION 1: Usage	
several times a day	8
every day	12
once a week	7
when someone tells me to	2
never	4
NA	1

QUESTION 2: Reply button	
Yes	28
No	0
I've never used the "reply" button	5
What "reply" button?	1

QUESTION 3: Sending	
Yes	26
No	2
I've never sent district email	6

QUESTION 4: To Office/Tom	
I prefer to send district/Groupwise email	9
I would use Groupwise email if I had to	2
I would rather write a note	11
I would rather use the phone	7
Other	5

QUESTION 5: to Services	
I prefer to send district/Groupwise email	11
I would use Groupwise email if I had to	3
I would rather write a note	4
I would rather use the phone	13
Other	3

QUESTION 6: Grade-Level	
I prefer to send district/Groupwise email	5
I would use Groupwise email if I had to	2
I would rather write a note	5
I would rather use the phone	8
Other	12

NA	2
----	---

QUESTION 7: Other Teachers	
I prefer to send district/Groupwise email	14
I would use Groupwise email if I had to	2
I would rather write a note	5
I would rather use the phone	8
Other	5

QUESTION 8: District/Offsite Teachers	
I prefer to send district/Groupwise email	14
I would use Groupwise email if I had to	4
I would rather write a note	2
I would rather use the phone	13
Other	1

QUESTION 9: Parents	
I prefer to send district/Groupwise email	3
I would use Groupwise email if I had to	2
I would rather write a note	8
I would rather use the phone	11
Other	9
NA	1

QUESTION 10: Email Only	
I would welcome the change	9
I wouldn't care/would adapt	16
I would hate the change	4
Other	4

QUESTION 11: Reasons for useage level	
computer not on and/or never logged in	2
no time	15
if others in my grade level used it more	6
if I had more training on using Groupwise	7
other	3
use district/Groupwise email enough	9

QUESTION 12: Calendar	
computer not on and/or never logged in	1
no time	9
if others in my grade level used it more	1

if I had more training on using Groupwise	18
other	5
use district/Groupwise email enough	2

QUESTION 13: Home email	
daily	14
once a week	7
occasionally	10
never	3

QUESTION 14: IM	
daily	2
once a week	2
occasionally	7
never	23

QUESTION 15: Tech is important		
Access to museums, other educators	24	
Prepare for the Future	30	
Keeps Teaching Current	17	
Too Expensive & Troublesome	1	
Tech is not Important	0	
Other	4	
QUESTION 16: Grade Level	resp	actual
Kindergarten	4	6
1st Grade	2	7
2nd Grade	5	7
3rd Grade	7	7
4th Grade	4	5
5th Grade	4	4
SDC	1	4
Services	5	6
Office	2	3

QUESTION 17: Responded Via	
Email	7
Box/Hand-Carried	27

QUESTION 18: Response Time	
Same Day	8
Day Two AM	9
Day Two PM	5
Day Three AM	3
Day Three PM	5
Day Four AM	1

Day Four PM	0
Day Five AM	0
Day Five PM	2
Day Six and Following	1